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ABSTRACT

Examines the early literacy experiences of a bilingual Chicano student, focusing on how these experiences affected the students' reading and writing skill development. For a period of 6 months, research elicited information about the student's relationships with teachers, memories of school experiences, and resulting self concept and behavior in class. Writing and oral language samples were examined for language skills and habits. A pattern of anxiety and doubt was found to characterize the student's relationship with written language. It is concluded that for non-native English-speaking students, successful early literacy experiences depend heavily on sensitive teachers, both to assist in learning and to avoid false diagnoses during early cognitive and personal growth stages. Finally, it is suggested that while some limited-English-speaking children may benefit from immersion in all English-speaking classes, others will encounter difficulties and experience failure in the same setting. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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# THE LITERACY EXPERIENCES OF A CHICANO STUDENT: A CASE STUDY OF ERNESTO

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Success in acquiring academic literacy skills depends to a great extent on early literacy experiences, since these provide the foundation upon which all subsequent development rests. They also become the base for a person's attitudes toward reading and writing, and by extension, toward school. While this is true for all ethnic groups, researchers interested in examining school failure among Hispanic background students in particular must elicit literacy histories from the students participating in their research studies (Valdés 71).

In her recent comprehensive review of the literature on the writing of Hispanic background students, Valdés notes that with a few exceptions (Edelsky, Hudelson, Wong Fillmore), this area of research has not been informed by what is already known about writing among mainstream students. For instance, many of the studies reviewed attempted to determine the extent of Spanish language interference on the English writing of Hispanic background students, thus focusing on the written product rather than the means by which a student arrived at that product. Nor has this area of research paid enough attention to the nature of bilingualism itself, and how the second language acquisition process relates to writing behaviors and abilities.

Valdés concludes with a research agenda derived from "an understanding of the nature of bilingualism and of the nature of

writing and from a desire to link the two areas together" (95). For example, the exact population of the study must be clearly defined. Checking the box "Hispanic" is not enough; it is crucial to distinguish between the many and varied peoples grouped together under this term. Issues of paramount importance are their country of origin, their first and favored language(s), and their length of residence in the United States. Middle-class Cuban refugee children will have a different experience than rural Central American immigrants. Neither of these, in turn, is comparable to the experience of Chicanos, defined as people born in the United States of Mexican descent.

Finally, Valdés calls for an investigation into the quality of instruction received by non-college bound bilingual minority students--the ones considered "at risk" and most often subjects in the studies to date. Perhaps tracking and the self-fulfilling prophecy syndrome are contributing causes to school failure among these students.

This paper addresses these topics by focusing on how the early literacy experiences of a bilingual Chicano student affected his reading and writing skill development, and suggests that his is not an isolated case. Indeed, we have much to learn from young adults like Ernesto, whose response to schooling and literacy become a bit more understandable when we dig beneath the surface.

The first veneer that must be stripped away is the term "Chicano." Because of the continuous nature of Mexican

immigration to the United States, Chicanos are no more homogeneous a group than Hispanics. For instance, some Chicanos learn English as their first and only language, while others do not begin to learn it until they enter school. They also vary in the degree of second language acquisition (whether it is Spanish or English), and most especially in the degree of literacy skills in their first and second languages.

Chicano children who do not learn English before entering school and are not enrolled in a bilingual program face the formidable task of learning enough spoken English quickly enough to be able to acquire literacy in English along with their monolingual peers. But research has shown that it takes several years for a child to learn a language well enough to be able to take on cognitively demanding work in that language, such as learning to read and write (Cummins). It can be difficult for these children to rebound from any early academic failure.

## Ernesto

I visited an adult basic writing class where data had previously been collected as part of a larger research project (Hull and Rose). The class was at an urban community college in northern California, part of an entire basic education program that teaches adults the skills they need to re-enter either the job market or the educational system. The other courses in the program included reading, math, and computer skills. I was to observe the writing class in order to become acquainted with the

instructor's method and the classroom environment, both of which were important for the analysis of our data.

My observation notes were precise until the instructor announced a freewriting. These stream-of-consciousness sessions were to become a semi-regular event in the class. On that day, I lost interest in my own writing and looked to see who was and who was not writing. Of the ten students present, all of them soon began writing, except the only Chicano in the class, whom I'll call Ernesto. The instructor was making the rounds, answering questions and providing feedback. When he went over to Ernesto, I saw that they talked, but I could not hear what they said. Finally, nine minutes into a 12-minute writing period, Ernesto began to write. Slowly, deliberately. I had to focus my gaze on his desk to make sure, but yes, the pen was moving. I was dying to know what he had written.

I left the class with that same longing, and it was strong enough to make me come back as a tutor. After a couple of weeks, I got to know Ernesto better. He was born in Sacramento, California, the fifth of seven children. His parents are from Zacatecas, Mexico. Spanish was and continues to be the language of the home, and Ernesto was not fluent in English when he started kindergarten. He is young (22), and has always worked in situations that do not demand much in the way of literacy skills. He deals with different sorts of chemicals at his job, but this is not a problem for him: he said he knows what to do "by the smell and color."

Affective factors and literacy

Ernesto and I worked together for six months, both in class and in outside tutorial sessions. Through our many sessions together, I got to know him and learn about his history in ways that questionnaires do not allow. Eventually I was able to identify several attitudinal characteristics which seemed to have impacted on his literacy progress up to that time.

First and foremost, Ernesto is a Spanish-English bilingual, and one of his languages is stigmatized in many parts of the nation. It is certainly possible that he, like many in society, began to believe that the root of his problems with literacy lay in his knowledge of this minority language. He once said he felt it was easier to just know one language than two. Thus, while he did not blame his literacy problems specifically on his bilingualism, neither did he regard it as an asset.

His linguistic insecurity was most evident on the phonological level. For instance, once, when Ernesto was reading something aloud, he had trouble pronouncing the word "oxygen" and blamed this on his "accent." I had not heard anything different from his normal speech, which has a Mexican accent discernible only to a trained ear. I asked him when he noticed it, and he replied that he heard it when reading unknown words. But since many words will be unfamiliar to someone who avoids reading, it seemed as if he had created a circle of self-fulfilling prophecy and self-degradation.

Ernesto had learned by this time how to avoid situations that called for any reading or writing whatsoever, a strategy that accomplished his goal of avoiding ridicule, but it was ultimately counterproductive, since without practice, his reading and writing skills could not improve. He would occasionally force himself to read on his own, he said, but when he came across unfamiliar words, he just became discouraged and self-recriminating.

Finally, Ernesto showed himself to be strongly motivated during our sessions. There was a practical reason for this: up until this time, he had been living in his parents' home, working nights. But his father was soon to retire, and his parents were preparing to return to Mexico. Ernesto would not be going with them, because, as he told me, "this [the U.S.] is the only world I know." So staying in school this time became a priority, to get the skills and training he would need to live independently.

School history

Ernesto's school history is not unique: we have all heard adult basic writers talk about that one traumatic teacher they had in the formative early grades. For Ernesto, she was a ruler-toting woman who, as he says, "used intimidation to teach" in the first or second grade. He protested to his parents, who eventually had a conference with the school principal. But the rest of what happened has gotten lost in hazy and surrealistic memories. He claimed the principal left it up to him (Ernesto)

to decide the fate of the teacher--whether she should be fired or not:

> E: I was on the field, and she [the teacher] came and took me aside and said, "Y'know, I really need this job. I just been goin' through some tough times," and she started crying and the whole thing, and she made me feel bad... and uh... I dunno if this is a dream, though.

However much fantasy may have entered into this part of his memory, he did change classrooms, and said it was "like heaven" in the new one. Not all children have such traumatic experiences, but events like these can have dire consequences for a child's attitudes toward learning and school. For Ernesto, he never got over the terror he had come to associate with learning. He was already behind by then, but he explained: "I didn't wanna slow down the class, so I kept quiet."

Perhaps it was this silence, coupled with his inability to read at grade level, that convinced Ernesto's 3rd or 4th grade teacher to recommend him for the ESL program, which pulled out students from the mainstream classes for more intensive English language work. Ernesto told me his reaction to this:

> E: They used to send me to, what's it called, ESL class. But I never knew how to read in Spanish. ESL--I didn't even know what it meant, cuz I been speaking English since I was in... in kindergarten, so... English was no problem. That's what they thought,

> y'know, what was wrong. But it was wrong. It was that they was going too fast. (at another session) It was more degrading to me than helpful. Why am I here? I don't write and read Spanish. Y'know, I was born here and everything, I don't see why-, I don't deserve to be here, or somethin'. At the time, I thought I coulda done it with the rest of the kids.

So Ernesto began developing ways to defend against the reading and writing he could not do: he became a clown. He told me about a book his community college class was reading, The Second Greatest Clown in the World, about a child who could not read well, so his teacher thought he was stupid. Ernesto said that to "get their attention, or to get, kinda like respect from the other students, he would be a clown." In the book, the boy acted like a clown because he had difficulty understanding the teacher, since he spoke Polish at home. Ernesto could relate to the clown bit. He told me how it started: "At first, you could guess, and you get into the habit and uh, you can't really break down the words, and there's nowhere to escape, and you start, you know, clowning."

Amazingly (or maybe not), Ernesto never repeated a year. He was passed on from grade to grade, getting easier work from the teachers, and as soon as he could get a job and start working, he did. He was graduated from high school nevertheless and attended community college once or twice, but had always dropped out after his initial efforts proved fruitless.

Ernesto's reading and writing

One cannot do justice to the complexity of anyone's literacy problems in a few pages, but certain patterns seem to characterize Ernesto's interaction with print and deserve mention: a preoccupation with sound and letter correspondences, and the degree to which his anxiety short-circuited him even when he was on the right track.

Too much attention to sounds and letters while reading and writing constantly derailed Ernesto's thinking. Once we read an article about a Dr. Walter Cannon's research into voodoo, a work that was one of the first to suggest that the inducement of fear or terror could cause physiological harm. Ernesto summarized the article orally very well, expressing some of the subtle nuances in the original:

> E: All this really is about, is whether or not voodoo, voodoo death is real. And uh, this guy Cannon, he wants to prove it so bad, and uh, so he got these other doctors, he got 'em like believin'-, not really believin' it, but they, they um, they thought they'd, they'd um, they could give it a little thought and uh, they investigated further; and there was nothing out of the ordinary about it. It was just that if you believe it, if you believe in it, then it'll kill you.

Then Ernesto wrote the following summary:

> I read a about the doctor Cannon
> who believe in Voodoo Death.

that Death by curs. He try
to explan why peaple drop dead.
This phenomenon desere some ~~ead su~~
studies. In article there where some
examples some peaple. Cannon ~~hear~~
thear is the curse victims theirs shock
and thinking about being curse ~~and deading~~
and thinking about being curse to dead
~~Some Experments with~~
And some Experments with animals.

The other doctor ~~wet~~ went a little
deeper in studies with oldfock
systems of medicine work; and patie mind
can a big effect on his physical
health. Cannon said we've all got the power
of voodoo deth locke up in
our. ~~t obd~~ mind
~~to obvious or repressed desser~~.

This is my typed version of his first draft, keeping true to his cross-outs and his spelling and line divisions. There are few complete sentences, although the gist of the article is certainly there. He later admitted he had been in a hurry because he was going to see his girlfriend after our session. From both the oral and written summaries it becomes clear that reading comprehension is not the problem.

The next time we met, he began working on a second draft. He wanted to change one of his sentences from "The other doctors went a little deeper in studies," to "Cannon convinced other doctors to go just a little deeper in these studies." After several attempts at it, he did say, "to go", but then said: "So they don't got no other 'went', no other form? Y'know, it's not even close to the spelling." Ernesto got stuck because he had been looking for a word that was closer to the surface form of "go" rather than thinking in terms of the meaning he wanted. And in a similar episode, he was trying to change "his" to "their", but could not think of the plural: "His? or hers? Hers and his?" When I told him, he said: "See, I couldn'ta got it. I was tryin' to look at it from the 'h' form."

Ernesto also exhibited much anxiety and self-doubt when reading or writing, enough to virtually render him inarticulate. His oral summary of the voodoo article above is an example of this: while he had a sophisticated understanding of the content, his execution was full of restarts and self-interruptions. He never had problems talking about what he did last weekend or about an overcoat he used to own, so this hesitation seemed related to school tasks.

Ernesto's oral revision process provided a powerful example of this anxiety. He wanted to revise the following particularly fragmented sentence: "Cannon thear is the curse victims theirs shock and thinking about being curse." I had recalled from our previous session that the second word was "theory," which helped

him reconstruct what he had been trying to say. The text had concluded that voodoo victims brought most of their troubles upon themselves through shock and the power of suggestion. The following might seem a laborious process of eking out thoughts, but this seems like a necessary stage for some developing writers:

> E: Okay. [pause] I know what I'm tryin' to say, but it's still scrambled. Could be a shock, thinkin' about bein' cursed. Okay, they're shocked because they were cursed, right? And thinkin' about that it is a curse, a voodoo curse, then, then uh, leads them to... I almost had it. Okay, "His theory, Cannon's theory is victims.. Okay, the curse victim"... I'm tryin' to find a word for... "Cannon's theory is that curse victims"... Okay, I think. Maybe I'm sayin' "curse victims" too soon. Okay, "His theory is... that the curse victims..."

I had not thought to remove "curse victims" from the sentence, but I tried, and it made more sense. It was still complicated, but I envisioned his reasoning to be something like, "Cannon's theory is that the shock and the thought of being cursed causes the victims' death." His solution impressed me, so I said so and asked him to read it without the "curse victims:"

> E: Let's see. Okay, "Cannon's theory is that..." Ah, I dunno. I lost it.
>
> M: Jump over it. You have it. It just makes so much

sense that way. You crossed it out, didn't you?

E: Yeah.

M: Okay, so when you get here, "is"--

E: I keep sayin' it.

M: Just jump over it. It's crossed out. Just jump over it.

E: Alright, let's see. "Cannon's theory their that their shock thinking about curse"--this makes sense?

M: Yeah. "His, well, his theory <u>is</u>." I don't think you said "is". "Cannon's theory is--"

And so it went. Ernesto knew where he wanted to go at this point, but was not able to get there: he became too anxious and doubt-riddled. I might have played into that somehow, but if so, it was with an encouraging statement. In fact, this whole episode could be considered a best-case scenario in that Ernesto was working with someone he had come to trust, and on a summary that was not being handed in or graded. Yet with all that, he still did not seem to trust himself enough.

Five minutes later we were still working out the structure of that sentence. Ernesto reread aloud all that he had written up to that point, and finished his thought orally. I wrote it down so that it would be written, if only by me. That way, he could forget the wording without danger of losing it. Afterwards, he commented: "It's so easy it's silly. It makes me laugh--after I have it down. But I make it so hard on myself. I make such a big deal out of it."

This deep-rooted self-doubt, along with the inordinate amount of attention paid to sounds and letters seemed to short-circuit Ernesto's thought flow when writing.

Conclusion

As far as Ernesto is concerned, his struggle is not over. He is fortunate to be in a sensitive basic education program that emphasizes writing as communication and not its mechanical aspects, and that utilizes tutors for more personal feedback. But improvement takes time, and Ernesto's motivation over the long haul will determine his ultimate success. He needs to experience small and then larger victories, each of which will contribute to his self-confidence. He must apply the large-scale motivation of making something of himself to tasks like doing homework--actually writing--and turning it in.

But if Ernesto is at all representative of many Chicano students, then we need to try and get at the causes of his situation. First of all, his early literacy experiences show how crucial it is to have sensitive teachers. This is not just to avoid the fearful scenes Ernesto described with "the pointed stick," but also to avoid possibly false diagnoses of children like Ernesto and other clowns, during the formative stages of their cognitive and personal growth.

Second, it seems that because he is a speaker of a minority language, he became subject to the attitudes that the school and many other parts of society have toward his language and its speakers. In other words, right off the bat, he was seen as

being at a disadvantage. At first, the disadvantage may have existed only in the minds of others, but it soon must have become a part of Ernesto's self-concept as well, as he internalized the image of himself as a failure. This began to affect his work with language in school, to the point where now, he is so full of anxiety when writing that he loses ideas before they get on paper, or he thinks "their" can't be the plural to his or her, because it doesn't start with an "h."

Finally, while some children with limited English capabilities may profit from being immersed in all-English speaking classes, others will encounter difficulties and experience failure in the same setting. Schools must respect different learning styles and foster the potential for success in all of its students. A strong bilingual education program could do just that, producing Spanish-English biliterates instead of adults struggling to <u>become</u> literate. It is time to end the notion that initial schooling in the home language will be detrimental to these students. A lack of understanding of school, literacy, and their personal and social usefulness is much more harmful.

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